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SUBJECT: CHAD'S MEDIA CLIMATE EVOLVING POSITIVELY AS OPPOSITION
MATURES

REFTEL: NDJAMENA 13

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (SBU) Goual Nanassoum, head of an EU-funded project on empowering the media in Chad, told DCM Jan 22 that he believed that media freedom had improved over the past year as a consequence of both GoC and opposition commitment to the August 13, 2007 Accords. Nanassoum told us that he felt international support had been critical to evolution in the Chadian media climate, and offered that the GoC's greater tolerance of media criticism beginning in 2009 was due to the increasingly responsible stance that Chadian journalists were taking, as the Chadian opposition abandoned its strident and combative "enemy" approach to politics and assumed a more positive approach -- albeit still strongly critical of the government and its policies. Nanassoum is a respected journalist and historian with a deep knowledge of the media environment. His comments that evolution is occurring are encouraging. END SUMMARY.

STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOM

¶2. (SBU) Nanassoum stressed that 2009 had been a year of limited, but nevertheless noticeable, progress for Chad in terms of media freedom. He made clear that additional improvements were obviously necessary, in part because neither the government nor citizens were accustomed to working with a free media - with the result that press cards were not universally understood or respected. Nanassoum described current attitudes of opposition-oriented journalists toward the GoC as "suspicious" rather than "fearful," as the number of cases of actual abuse was down significantly when compared with the situation in 2008. Verbal confrontations between journalists and local authorities, particularly in areas of Chad where President Deby's popularity was not strong, continued to occur. But this was a clear improvement over the violent attacks on journalists that had occurred in the past.

¶3. (SBU) Reviewing progress toward the goal of rescinding Ordinance 5, Nanassoum recalled that two alternative draft laws prepared to address the widespread perception that the emergency Ordinance was out of date (as Chad was no longer at war) had turned out to be as bad as or worse than the original, which had in any case never been put into practice. Both of the alternative texts were being allowed to languish in the National Assembly, where their flaws were well known. There was a generalized appreciation that a new way forward was necessary, and that Ordinance 5 might be found

unconstitutional if applied against a journalist who challenged it to court. Four independent journalists had taken it upon themselves to prepare a different text that removed all criminal penalties for media-related offenses. This document was under discussion among opposition members of the National Assembly.

14. (SBU) Responding to our question on the status of the three other goals, besides rescinding Ordinance 5, of last May's "Etats-Generaux" meeting of journalists and government reps, Nanassoum noted that the call for a Maison des Medias had come to fruition, with the GoC having provided a building in the fall of 2009, and international partners having contributed funding for training courses. The notion of removing the onerous tax structure that applied to the independent media was still pending, as was ratification by the GoC of UNESCO's 1950 Florence Agreement on the importation of educational, scientific and cultural materials.

15. (SBU) Journalists continued to charge that they were unable to obtain adequate information from the GoC, said Nanassoum, and the Minister of Interior had threatened to break the pens of journalists who criticized the government - which had prompted the Prime Minister, Youssouf Saleh Abbas, to issue a denunciation of his colleague. Nanassoum praised the Prime Minister for having arranged a grant to support the Maison des Medias, which he said he hoped would usher in a new era of more cordial relations between the media and government. Proponents of greater media freedom existed throughout the Chadian government, Nanassoum continued, and included, in addition to the Prime Minister, many employees of the national television station - who were technical experts rather than politicians - some in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a variety of others in the range of ministries. The new President of the HCC was "talented and active, but very political," said Nanassoum. Those who were least open to press freedom tended to be in President

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Deby's inner circle.

15. (SBU) The legal troubles of several opposition papers including La Voix appeared to have political motivations, said Nanassoum, but were complicated by the technical errors of the editors in adhering to laws on business operations. Nanassoum recommended that journalists use the Chadian "Ethics Code" to defend their own rights and guide their behavior. He urged continued assistance from the EU, UNESCO, U.S, Canada, Germany and others, all of whom have provided technical assistance in this sector to Chad.

EU EFFORTS TO IMPROVE MEDIA CLIMATE

16. (SBU) Nanassoum described the broad goals of EU assistance in the area of media freedom, pointing out that the August 13, 2007 Accords between the government and opposition - which the EU had endorsed - specified the need for reinforcing the role of the media in democratic processes, particularly in the lead-up to Chad's planned 2010 and 2011 elections. The EU's goals with respect to its project on media empowerment were three-fold: 1) to bring about the regular convening of general meetings (Etats-Generaux) involving all players in the communications realm; 2) to provide training by European media professionals to ready the Chadian press corps to report on elections; 3) to encourage the development of self-regulating bodies of media professionals committed to responsible reporting standards.

COMMENT

17. (SBU) Nanassoum is a respected journalist and historian with a deep knowledge of the media environment. His comments that evolution is occurring are encouraging.

BIO DATA

¶8. (SBU) Nanassoum is a journalist and specialist in Chad's pre-colonial history. He served as editor of "Tchad et Culture", a local magazine, before taking up the position of Secretary General of the local NGO, "Observatoire de la Dontologie et de l'Ethique des Mdias Tchadiens" (ODEMET), a body created by journalists with the aim of auto-regulating their profession and encouraging media freedom. He currently heads the EU's "Empowering Media in the Democratic Process" project.

¶9. (U) Minimize considered.

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